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AUTHOR Gale, Steven H.
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ABSTRACT

The de facto signature style of the Modern Language Association's "PMLA" magazine not only bores many readers (contributing to the decline in MLA membership), but mandates rejection of any papers stylistically distinct from previous "PMLA" articles. In addition, to judge from several rejection letters, "PMLA" subject matter bias proscribes even acceptably written articles when their field is modern drama. This deduction is supported by a statistical analysis of the subjects included in 146 scholarly articles published in "PMLA" between January 1978 and March 1983. The analysis shows articles on film and contemporary drama conspicuously absent, with such important playwrights as Beckett, Cummings, Miller, Osborne, and Pinter neglected completely. The authors most written about were Chaucer and Shakespeare (with eight articles each), followed by Dickens, Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Milton, Moliere, and Twain. An additional paradigm, identified by an established traditional scholar, is that the number of footnotes in an article is an important indicator of its scholarly value, a pernicious view when contemporary drama is too new to have an established body of criticism. These observations suggest that "how to write a 'PMLA' article" does not include writing about subjects in the field of drama as a possibility, a self-fulfilling perception that discourages drama scholars from submitting articles to "PMLA." Further, certain referees' rejection comments suggest that expert knowledge of previous scholarship colors their assessment and disallows alternative views. (JG)

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Blackwoods Would, PMLA Won't; or, How to Write a PMLA Article

Steven H. Gale

Over the past twelve years I have submitted a fair number of articles to PMLA (about one every other year). All of these have been published; none has appeared in PMLA.

Early in my career I assumed that the normal circumstances were working against me: the essays were not good enough, although the rejections always suggested that my writing was satisfactory; I was not an established scholar; no "superstar" was serving as my patron/booster; I was not teaching at a major research institution. Once PMLA adopted the blind review system, most of these potentially negative factors were removed.[1] However, my submissions were still rejected.

So why do I still send most of my work to PMLA before I send it elsewhere? Because it is generally accepted within the profession that this journal is the top of the heap, so to speak. In Michael West's renowned College English article evaluating major journals publishing articles on American and English literature, PMLA was one of the very few that West accorded an "A" rating.[2] In some English departments a publication in PMLA is considered the equivalent of a book publication (that is a lot of power). There is no doubt that being a contributor carries with it a sense of personal satisfaction for an author since this represents a form of public recognition that one's scholarship has been accepted as significant by one's peers, and it is also an extremely visible status symbol. PMLA on a vita sheet can certainly mean the difference between being a prime candidate for a juicy job and merely one of the many who applied. At MLA conventions authors of PMLA articles are stopped in hotel hallways by strangers

who recognize the name on their name tags and who want to talk about the piece that they read.

Yet there is an ironic reversal that is attached to PMLA contributors too. When I was in graduate school I heard other graduate students and young faculty members belittling PMLA because it was a closed shop that published only boring articles by a group of old fuddy-duddies. It was said that the old-boy system made certain that the same stodgy style, conservative approach to scholarship, and predictable (read traditional and unimaginative) topics would be perpetuated. Now these groups complain about the same things, except that the old-boy accusation has been dropped. Interestingly, these sentiments were publicaly expressed by several members of the Delegate Assembly at their annual meeting at the MLA Convention in New York in December 1983. Is it possible that there is something operating in the very nature of PMLA that has created this apparent consistency over such a long period of time and across two different selection procedures? The answer seems to be yes.

Why is this important? Well, for several reasons. Obviously, those connected with PMLA (as part of the editorial process, as authors, as readers, as members of the MLA) cannot enjoy this aspect of the journal's reputation. More important, though, is that a lot of PMLA's past readers no longer receive their copies because, disappointed and disillusioned, they have cancelled their subscriptions--and this means cancelling their membership in the MLA. It is clear that PMLA's diminished reputation does not bode well for our profession because the articles that appear in it are received with some scepticism purely because of where they are published, thus potentially decreasing their contribution to scholarship (whether deservedly so or not is unimportant; whether consciously or not is unimportant--the effect is the same). It is also clear that in the

contemporary world we are better served by an expanding membership than by a shrinking one.[3]

The people who have told me that they have dropped their MLA memberships represent a wide range of institutions over a broad geographical area (from coast to coast, as a matter of fact). In my own department several senior faculty members have let their memberships lapse. Since membership in professional organizations is one of the elements considered in evaluating faculty at my college (admittedly this accounts for an extremely small portion of the overall evaluation), and since as Department Head I try to help my faculty garner all of the credit for which they are eligible, I have asked these faculty members why they are no longer MLA members even at the risk of affecting their evaluations. Whether colleagues across the nation or in my own school, the answer always places disappointment in PMLA as the major factor in their decision (and, of course, that is putting it politely).

At a recent Association of Departments of English Summer Seminar I talked with a member of the MLA staff about what this all meant, and how something might be done to alleviate the problems involved. About the only thing that came of our discussion was the staff member's confirmation that while there is not actually a required style imposed by PMLA's referees, in his opinion there is a de facto style that must be acknowledged by virtue of the fact that the referees tend to look for the same kind of material that has already appeared in the journal (which may say something about how the referees are chosen).

How to write a PMLA article, then, requires a certain amount of attention to style--not just good writing, but to the style that might be recognized as one of PMLA's signatures. But, even if this is so, thereby explaining why some readers are now former readers, how is it that some articles that might be made to fit the template are still rejected?

Now we are getting to the heart of the matter, as Scobie would say. Let me recount two experiences that I have had with submissions to PMLA in the past couple of years. At the 1979 MLA Convention I read a paper on sex and politics in Plenty, a play by contemporary British dramatist David Hare. Over the next year or so a number of people contacted me about the paper, urging that it be published. Accordingly, I rewrote the essay and submitted it to PMLA. The first reader found it well written, with the topic suitable for publication in PMLA. He recommended publication, incidentially noting that there has been precious little on contemporary British drama published in PMLA and indicating both that this situation ought to change and that this article was a good place to start. The second reader agreed with the first reader's evaluation (admittedly with some minor revisions suggested), but felt that the subject matter was too limited to appeal to PMLA's readership. Given that PMLA is the major journal for MLA members, it is reasonable to expect that its contents should reflect the wide and diverse interests of the entire membership, not just majority and mainstream topics. However, although he found the piece publishable, reader number two recommended that it not be published in PMLA, and he went on to state that he was sure that the article would find a home with a journal specializing in modern drama. As is PMLA's policy, when there is disagreement as to whether an essay should be published, the piece was sent to a third reader. Reader number three said that he (why three he's by the way?) would have written a completely different essay if he had thought to write about this play, so needless-to-say, he voted nay.

Several months after the article was returned to me, an editorial by Joel Conarroe was published in PMLA stating that the journal was establishing a policy

of printing articles for more limited audiences as well as trying to publish things that would appeal to the majority of the readership. Shyly, I wrote to Conarroe and asked if, in the light of his pronouncement, it might be worthwhile having reader number two reread the article, since his primary objection no longer applied. Conarroe graciously allowed that it probably would not make any difference, but it couldn't hurt, and I resubmitted the article. Unfortunately, reader number two maintained that the play is unknown in the United States and that there simply would not be a large enough audience to justify publication, and again no acceptance was recommended. Ironically, Plenty became one of the most popular and critically acclaimed plays on Broadway during the 1982 season, and my article has been accepted for inclusion in a volume of essays on drama.

More recently I decided to attack what I have concluded is the major problem by submitting two articles simultaneously and in my cover letter to Conarroe pointing out that there has been nothing published in PMLA in the area of contemporary drama for a number of years, and nothing ever on Harold Pinter, one of the most important English language playwrights of the twentieth century and a subject of many of my own publications (including three books). There can be no argument that Pinter is significant; furthermore, the editor of Theatre Journal reports that more articles on Pinter are submitted to that journal than on any other single subject. The two articles that I enclosed were on Pinter. The readers' reactions this time around were even more revealing than the first set on Hare had been. Reader number one did not object to my study, but he completely disagreed with my conclusions and checked the "do not publish" box. Reader number two concurred (he had a copy of the first reader's report, a disturbing practice). Total rejection.

From these experiences I have drawn two conclusions. First, how to write a PMLA article does not include subjects in the field of modern drama as a possibility. Naturally, my submissions do not compose a very large data pool, but other scholars in the field report similar experiences, and it is a fact that nothing has shown up between PMLA's covers to disprove my contention. A statistical analysis of the subjects included in PMLA produces interesting insights--probably into the journal's referees.

In the twenty-two issues published between January 1978 and March 1983, one hundred forty-six scholarly articles appeared (this does not include the ten president's addresses and executive directors' reports, or the "Forum" and "Professional Notes and Comments" sections).[4] Although it is sometimes difficult to categorize essays because of overlapping topics, the following chart illustrates the chronological distributions and subject range of the essays:

British Literature (including Pound and Eliot)

- Twentieth Century : 6
- Nineteenth Century : 16
- Eighteenth Century : 17
- Seventeenth Century : 6
- Sixteenth Century : 15
- Pre-Sixteenth Century : 11

American Literature (excluding Pound and Eliot)

- Twentieth Century : 4
- Pre-Twentieth Century : 9

Non-English language literatures

- French : 13
- Italian : 8

Spanish : 8

German : 4

Polish : 2

Russian : 2

Scandinavian : 1

Chinese : 1

Literary genres (not included in above categories)

Fiction : 8

Poetry : 2

Drama : 1

General : 3

Among the authors represented, the most written about were Chaucer and Shakespeare--eight articles focused upon each. They were followed by Dickens and Wordsworth with four articles apiece. Six authors (Blake, the author of Lazarus de Tormes, Keats, Milton, Moliere, and Twain) were subjects of three articles apiece, eleven authors (the author of Beowulf, Conrad, Dante, Defoe, Flaubert, Kafka, Pope, Mary Shelley, Spencer, Tasso, Whitman) appeared as primary subjects twice, and sixty-seven only once. The works most frequently written about were the Canterbury Tales (eight times), and Lazurus (three times). Additional articles dealt with one of the three genres: fiction, 9; poetry, 3; drama, 1. Women writers were the subjects of eight essays. A consideration of the names of authors written about once (there is only one article each on Browning, Faulkner, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Joyce, Melville, and Shelley for instance) or never (Beckett as playwright, Cummings, Miller, Osborne, Pinter--an endless list) in this five and a half year period is also enlightening. As would be expected, film studies receive about the same amount of lack of

attention as does contemporary drama (in spite of the existence of a film division for MLA members), but the reason that there is a similar omission of articles on film may be, of course, that papers are submitted to and accepted by other journals without being sent to PMLA first, but there is only one journal for pieces on contemporary drama, really, and there would be little reason to submit an article anywhere before sending it to PMLA, given the ranking, reputation, and influence of the Journal, unless PMLA's reputation is that it will not publish anything in a given area.

In 1984, then PMLA editor English Showalter, Jr. recognized, as had editors before him, that dissatisfaction that echoes mine was being expressed by members of the association. He devoted two editorrials to the problem of article selection, but, as had his predecessors, he failed to consider the problem in its entireity, and thus the answers that he provided were not completely applicable. In the October issue, for instance, he provided statistics for rates of subjects both submitted and accepted from 1973 through 1983. His figures confirm mine: the three lowest acceptance rates are in the categories of twentieth-century American ("15 acceptances, or 3% in the field"[5]), twentieth-century British (16.3%), and French (9.3%). Admittedly, twentieth-century American and twentieth-century British had the largest number of total submissions. However, there are several problems with these figures. The American percentage, for instance, is actually 2.76, not 3. That is not major discripancy, of course, but there are problems with the data that are significant. While admitting that "English and American literature dominate the journal,"[6] Showalter does not provide figures to show

the level of domination is. More importantly, he does not provide figures to show the overall percentages by period. Finally, and most perinent to my contentions, there are no figures given for divisions by genre.

I do not have access to information regarding those essays not accepted for publication, naturally, so I have made the assumption that scholars of contemporary drama are as good as researchers and writers as are scholars in other literary fields. If the numbers of articles submitted in contemporary drama are approximately equal to those submitted in other areas, and the pieces themselves are equally good or bad, then it must be the referees' biases that account for the disparity in numbers of the material that is published.

As a related aside, at another more recent meeting I had a chance to talk with a scholar who has published a considerable amount, including an article on scholarly publication. We discussed, among many other interconnected items, the questions that I am addressing here. His response, when I declared that the numbers of journals that publish analyses of contemporary drama with any regularity could be counted on one hand, was "How many footnotes were there?" in my articles. When I replies that there were something over twenty-five in the Hare article, he asserted that that seemed scholarly enough. The implications of this exchange are astounding, though probably not surprising. A representative of traditional, established areas of scholarship finds the number of footnotes in an article an important indicator of its scholarly value. In those

areas where there is a body of criticism already in existence, reference to this literature is vital. In areas that are too new for such a body of criticism, large numbers of footnotes are neither likely or even desirable, for we are establishing the scholarly canon to which future generations of academics may refer.[7] The situation is not unlike that faced by scholars of American literature for much of our nation's history.

Unhappily, a self-fulfilling prophecy intrudes here, for given their perception of PMLA's attitude regarding modern drama, most scholars in this area do, indeed, turn to other journals and do not even bother submitting articles to PMLA for consideration on the assumtion that they will merely be wasting time and postage. The solution to this is for PMLA to acknowledge its bias against drama, things modern, and especially modern drama, and to adjust accordingly.

My second conclusion grows out of comparison of the differing reactions to work on Hare on the one hand and to work on Pinter on the other. The solution to this situation is more difficult to determine. In the first case there are no Hare experts, since virtually nothing of a scholarly nature examining his writing has been published. As a result, the readers judged my essay on its merits as an article. The style and arguments were acceptable, and they had no preformed ideas about what should be said about Hare. With Pinter, though, there are over twenty-five years of critical writings to refer to, and the readers were not so concerned with my style (presumably the same as that of the Hare article) or the logic of my argument. Instead, they were concerned with how well my

opinion matched theirs. Since there was no match, according to the copies of the readers' reports that were sent me, they rejected my argument. They were not willing to accept an alternative view, or even to let the alternative view be presented in an intellecutal market place where the merits of the two opposing interpretations could be debated. What makes this all the more interesting, and underscores my point, is that reader number two for the Hare piece was also reader number two for the Pinter article.[8] What he found acceptable in the first place was unacceptable in the second. Chief among the most logical explanations for this behavior is the supposition that where he had little background he let the article speak for itself, and where he had more background he let his expectations color his assessment. "Curioser and curioser," Alice would have said, if she could have know that reader number one of the Pinter essay has referred to my previous writings on Pinter[9] in his own writing. Apparently the fact that it has been published makes it acceptable, but in manuscript form if it does not meet one's preconceptions of what the answer should be, it is dismissed. Having been a referee, I can attest to the ease with which one can fall into this trap.

What I am getting at is the ironic conclusion that sometimes experts in a field are the worst people to ask to serve as referees. Given that some prior knowledge in the field is uselful for the reader in assessing an article under consideration for publication, at the same time it might be worthwhile to have another reader involved who has little knowledge of the specific area. The second reader has less to lose in terms of needing to

have preconceptions met, and there is also the advantage that such a reference may well between represent the readership of PMLA as whole.

In the meantime, here I am again, having submitting this article to PMLA, hoping that it was adequately written, that it said something that the readership would find interesting and that the editorial process would finally lead to its publication in that journal. And, here I am again, having had a submission to PMLA rejected. Blackwoods would, but PMLA won't, so to speak. The reason for rejection this time was that the readers disagreed with both my contentions and my conclusions. Ironically, the first reader indicated that my "dissatisfaction with the evaluative process should be aired. . . but it does not belong in the pages of PMLA." (What better place?) The second reader declared that I am wrong regarding the use of specialists as readers. Moreover, this reader found that my tone leaves "something to be desired" and that my assessment of the journal's prestige is "excessive." Parenthetically, the referee's denial regarding the esteem with which PMLA is held in the profession is an interesting one (and sounds like either false modesty or reverse snobism) in light of information that I developed later. Even though I had no intention of doing so when I designed the project involved, my assertion was confirmed in 1985 when I surveyed members of the eleven English departments rated the top research departments in the nation (as established in a survey published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "How Professors Rated Faculty in 19 Fields," by Everett Carll Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset, January 15, 1979, p. 6). My survey was designed to determine the relative reputations of scholarly book publishers and journals. While the number of responses was too limited to be statistically significant, 58% listed PMLA among the top ten journals in

their area of expertise or in the category of general scholarly publications—26% ranked the journal number one. Perhaps my tone is light occasionally for such a serious subject, but my comments are based on others' expressed opinions as well as my own, and these two readers' responses are a nice reflection of exactly the attitude that I have been describing.

When this is published, I am sure that there will be some who will point at certain sections and say, "Ah, but you are wrong there," or "Sour grapes." I know that I have spoken in generalities and that this leaves me open to attack by those whose particular instances or opinions differ from mine. Still, I think that what I have said is generally true and that it is important enough that it should be said, whatever the consequences.[10]

Notes

[1]Incidentally, there is at least one drawback to the blind reading section process. In my case, for example, I have written a great deal on Harold Pinter, and I try to avoid repeating what I have said in previous publications so that my work will stand as a whole and no one can say that I keep saying the same things over and over. If the reader does not know this, at times the complaint has been made that I have ignored existing scholarships--often my own! If I refer to my own scholarships and the article is published, such references are awkward and seem arrogant. Perhaps I should do so anyway so that the reader knows that I am aware of, and have built on, existing criticism and then I should delete the offensive references before publication?

[2]Michael West, "A Review Essay," College English, 41, 8(April 1980): 903-23. Of the 175 journals listed, only 7 merited a pure "A" ranking in West's opinion.

[3]MLA statistics recorded in the September, 1984 issue (p. 555) show a membership high of 31, 356 in 1970 and a count of 26,340 in 1983--the lowest number since 1967, and representing a steady decline each year since 1978. The 1984 figure is up 1.6%. I have personally discussed this situation with over fifty members and past members.

[4]The figures cited below add up only to 137. Some articles simply did not fit into any convenient category. Unfortunately, through the March, 1987 issue, the contents of PMLA have remained constant since I have compiled these figures.

[5]English Showalter, "Editor's Column," PMLA, October, 1984, pp. 851-53.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Since this is only the seventh of only ten footnotes attached to this article, I am fearful of what is incidated about the quality of the piece. If the reader would feel more comfortable with additional footnotes, please feel free to contact me, and I will send you a collection of footnotes (both used and unused) that I have left over from other essays and which are just cluttering up the house.

[8]The identity of these readers was easy for me to establish since one signed his report and internal evidence in the other made the author's name obvious.

[9]These include a scholarly book published by Duke University Press, an annotated bibliography (over 2,050 entries) for G.K. Hall, a volume of essays edited for Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, and fifteen articles. These and other titles available on request. Please stipulate plain, brown wrapper, if so desired.

[10]Four rules for writing a PMLA article:

a. Exercise a dry, stodgy style, but be not pompous.

b. Use a lot of footnotes.

c. Be concerned about trifles; write only about insignificant details, rhetorically oriented if possible, that have little to do with the meaning of the work. Esoterica and opaqueness are a wondrous combination.

d. For your subject choose an author who has been safely dead for at least one hundred (100) years (the longer dead the safer), and preferably the subject should be someone who has never written a play or filmscript.